

# General Recall May 1978

Walt Staff

## THE LAST MAN OFF

- by Walter F. Staff, CM2c

MY MEMORY of the Pearl Harbor Attack is a black nightmare... entombed for two days in the bowels of one of the first ships sunk in that surprise attack on American territory. I was the *LAST MAN* to leave the USS OKLAHOMA alive! The blaze and roar of the attack - and the bedlam in the harbor that followed, were lost on me after the first two torpedoes were fired. The mighty OKLAHOMA capsized - going down in 15 minutes - with me and nearly half of her crew trapped inside her. After the first shock of the explosions and the realization we were under attack, the Communications System went dead along with the lights. There were four of us together and we started to fight our way out. A wall of rushing water caught us as the stricken vessel keeled over - two of the four were gone! We were slammed against a bulkhead and swirled in inky blackness as the ship settled on the harbor floor. Jack Centers and I found ourselves cut off from the rest of the world. -

The deathly silence of the deep settled in, broken only by the sound of the barking guns, which we figured were being fired from the battleship *MARYLAND* moored inboard of us.

We knew the ship was down, but it was impossible to determine how she was lying or to find anything familiar. We were completely disoriented in the pitch blackness. The debris-strewn water, layered with oil was above our waists now.

I kept exploring our prison and did locate a hatch but couldn't budge it. Then I noticed a glow on the opposite bulkhead and worked my way over to it. It turned out to be the luminous dial of a phone.

"I've found a phone!" I yelled over to Centers, "I'll call up the O.D. to have him come and get us out of here". But Centers didn't appreciate my humor, telling me this was no time for jokes.

Examining the dial closely, I found the numbers to be upside down. This was the first indication to us of the position of the ship. Time dragged on and on altho we had no idea how long we had been trapped. The water kept inching upward until there was barely head room. On one of my dives, I found a wrench which buoyed up our hopes for a while as we could use it to tap on the sides in hopes someone would hear us and come and get us out. Someone *Did* hear it - tho of course we didn't know it at the time.

After a while, we made only half-hearted efforts to signal - thinking it was hopeless. We knew the air would go bad soon and that would be it! In the mass confusion and the enormity of the damages to the fleet and the installations around the harbor, rescue efforts were understandably slow.

We later learned that our shipfitter, William S. Thomas, SF1c who had pulled many from the water following the attack, was taking one final cruise in a launch looking for survivors late Sunday, when he heard our tapping.

He immediately contacted some of our surviving officers and insisted he could save some of the entombed men if he could get some help and equipment from the Navy Yard. So from our tapping and the persistent effort of Thomas, the rescue got underway.

The task of cutting thru the hull and the many steel-layered compartments was not an easy one and extreme caution had to be taken to avoid ammunition or oil storage compartments.

It was slow, tedious work. The acetylene torches proved to be dangerous and they were forced to switch to air hammers which took longer to cut open avenues of escape, but lessened the risk to the entrapped men.

Work crews would come and go, but Bill Thomas and Harold Harris, CM3c, stayed on the hull to direct the work. When we had just about given up hope, we heard the welcome sound of drilling above us; but when the drill finally did break thru, the air pressure was released and the water rapidly rose in the compartment. After about an hour of drilling, they were only half way around an opening big enough for a man to crawl thru and at this point the water had reached the level of the cut they had made and began pouring thru on them. I guess they figured we would drown before they could finish cutting the opening and they abandoned the try.

That was a heartbreaking moment; really desperate now, Centers and I again went under and tried to force the balky hatch I had found. Evidently the change in water pressure had dislodged whatever was blocking it and we managed to open it and squeeze into a new compartment and dogged the hatch behind us.

If was a storage area and a bolt of bunting had wedged against the hatch and had somehow shifted enough so we could finally move it. This was a comparatively dry compartment. We located another hatch; but it was one that could be opened only from the other side. The outlook was pretty bleak, and by now I had lost the wrench I had been using to signal.

How much longer than this, I don't know because we had lost all sense of time, we heard movement on the other side. We shouted and banged our fists in a desperate last chance frenzy.

They located us and halted at the hatchway to make certain our compartment wasn't flooded - they could not take a chance on being trapped, too - but when we assured them it was not; they jerked it open and pulled out Centers and then me.

I was the last of the 34 entombed men the rescue crews managed to get out of the U.S.S. Oklahoma. THE first two to be discovered died before they got to them, but the remaining thirty two were rescued without serious injury.

They continued their efforts as long as the signals were heard, but none were discovered after we were released.

It was right around day-break when we emerged Tuesday morning and the sickening sight that greeted us was hard to believe. The *ARIZONA* lying aft of us was a smoldering ruin and the twisted, shattered remnants of our once proud fleet told us what had happened while we were fighting our own private battle for survival in that black, watery tomb. We knew we were in for a long, hard war.

WALT STAFF

SUNDAY MORNING AT 0750 ON 7 DECEMBER 1941, I WAS IN THE CARPENTER SHOP WHEN THE GENERAL ALARM WAS SOUNDED. I IMMEDIATELY WENT ALONG THE STARBOARD SIDE OF THE THIRD DECK TO MY BATTLE STATION.. I FELT SEVERAL EXPLOSIONS ON THE WAY TO REPAIR II. WHEN I GOT TO REPAIR II I TOOK MY PHONES AND WENT TO GET A FLASHLIGHT BUT THEY WERE LOCKED UP SO I WENT ON DOWN TO A-28, THE FORWARD AIR COMPRESSOR ROOM, AND STARTED TO SET ZED. THERE WAS AN ELECTRICIAN'S MATE AND A FIREMAN ALSO, CENTERS J.P.MM2c AND MYSELF IN THE COMPARTMENT. WHEN THE LIGHTS WENT OUT THE FIREMAN AND THE ELECTRICIAN'S MATE STARTED TO GO OUT THE ZED HATCH WHICH HAD BEEN SET BY REPAIR II; THEY WERE YELLING AND SCREAMING. WATER AND FUEL OIL WERE COMING DOWN THE HATCH. I TRIED TO STOP THEM FROM OPENING THE HATCH, BUT COULDN'T.

THE NEXT THING WE KNEW WE WERE ALL UNDER WATER AND OIL. CENTERS AND I WERE THE ONLY ONES THAT CAME UP.

IT TOOK US SOME TIME IN THE DARK TO FIND OUT THAT WE WERE BACK IN A-28 AND THE SHIP HAD CAPSIZED.

WE THEN TRIED TO GET INTO THE LINEN STOREROOM. IT WAS ON THE STARBOARD SIDE AND WAS OUT OF THE WATER. A-28 WAS ABOUT HALF FULL OF OIL AND WATER. THE STOREROOM WAS LOCKED AND IT TOOK SEVERAL HOURS TO BEAT THE LOCK OFF WITH A WRENCH THAT WE FOUND ON THE AIR COMPRESSOR. WE COULD NOT GET INTO THE STOREROOM AS GEAR MUST HAVE WEDGED AGAINST THE DOOR.

WE TRIED TO GET INTO A SMALL STOREROOM WHICH WAS ON THE OVERHEAD, BUT IT WAS ALSO LOCKED AND WE COULD NOT GET INTO POSITION TO BEAT THE LOCK OFF.

ABOUT MONDAY NOON WE HEARD TAPPING AND WE ANSWERED THEM. AFTER SO LONG THEY WERE RIGHT OVERHEAD AND WE COULDN'T HEAR THEM TALKING. WHEN THEY STARTED TO CUT INTO US IT LET OUT AIR AND WE WERE UNDER AIR PRESSURE, THE WATER CAME UP AS OUR AIR ESCAPED.,

THE WATER CAME UP AND OUT THE HOLE THEY WERE CUTTING AND THEY LEFT. BUT WE STILL HAD ABOUT SIX INCHES OF AIR SPACE.

WE TRIED THE LINEN ROOM AGAIN AND IT GAVE A LITTLE. APPARENTLY THE WATER HAD CLEARED THE GEAR FROM THE DOOR, WE IN AND STARTED TAPPING AGAIN.

THE RESCUERS SOON GOT OUT TO US AGAIN, AND WE LEFT THE SHIP AT 0200 TUESDAY MORNING.

I WISH TO THANK THESE MEN FOR THEIR HARD WORK IN RESCUING US. KEENUM CBM, THOMAS SF1c AND HARRIS EM2c

DESCENT INTO DARKNESS RAYMER PG 22/23



The smiling lad on the left is Jackson P. Centers, MoMM2c who was one of the last two men out at 0230, Dec. 9th, 1941! The '73 History Report had a microscopic likeness blown up from a group and it didn't do him justice. Isn't this better, Jack?